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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 006519

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [IR](#) [TU](#) [KNNP](#) [MNUC](#)

SUBJECT: TURKISH ATTITUDES TOWARD IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

REF: A. ANKARA 04647

- [1](#)B. ANKARA 03733
- [1](#)C. ANKARA 02640
- [1](#)D. ANKARA 02666
- [1](#)E. ANKARA 05064

Classified By: Ambassador Ross Wilson, reasons 1.4 (a and d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Official Turkish views about Iran's nuclear development program have shifted over the past year. Senior GOT officials question the bona fides of the Iranian nuclear program and believe that a nuclear armed Iran would pose a military threat. They are more concerned, however, about the shift in the balance of regional power and influence that an Iranian nuclear weapon would cause. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has stressed the need for a diplomatic solution, and supports European and American initiatives against an Iranian nuclear weapons program. At the same time, many Turks worry about potential U.S. military action against Iran. The GOT is also concerned about a possible economic sanctions regime that would negatively affect its economy and upset the balance Turkey has sought to maintain in its relations with its neighbor to the east. But the GOT will comply with sanctions, if they are mandated by the UN and narrowly focused. End summary.

No Longer In Denial  
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[1](#)2. (C) Over the past year, we have seen a shift in the public stance of Turkey's civilian leadership toward open acknowledgment of serious doubts about the intent of Iran's nuclear program and the threat that a nuclear armed Iran would pose. In January 2006, PM Erdogan stated for the first time publicly that Turkey could not support an Iranian nuclear program that included weapons development. The MFA has repeatedly called on Iran to be transparent and cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In a May 10 statement, the MFA criticized Iran for "hiding some aspects of its nuclear program" from the IAEA, causing a "loss of confidence" with the international community. FM Gul reportedly warned Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani "to remember the Iraqi example" on the effects of world public opinion, further telling Larijani in Ankara on May 8 that Iran would be isolated if it refuses to abandon the program. In his speech at the opening of Parliament in September, President Ahmet Sezer raised national concerns about Iran's nuclear program, calling for Iran to inspire trust in the international community.

13. (C) The Iran nuclear program is characterized as a threat in the Ankara media and privately by contacts. Writing in the economic-political daily "Dunya" in September, columnist Zafer Atay observed that Turkey will have to take action against Iran eventually because the nuclear threat to Turkey is unavoidable. National Security Council staff member Musa Gokpiner confided to us that the NSC regards Iran's nuclear program as a military threat to Turkey and that the issue is a standing item on the NSC agenda for its bi-monthly meetings. Iran's nuclear program has also been a topic for Ankara's relatively small but active think tank community. Arif Keskin, Middle East Specialist at the Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies (ASAM), told us that a nuclear armed Iran would pose a military threat primarily because of the unpredictable nature of the regime in Tehran.

14. (S) The military leadership at the Turkish General Staff (TGS) has always taken a strategic yet pragmatic view of Iran. Senior officers, generally not favorably disposed to Iran because of its fundamentalist Shiite government and the years of shelter it provided to PKK fighters across the border, view an Iranian nuclear program as a regional threat. Yet Deputy Chief of the General Staff (DCHOD) General Ergin Saygun noted during his November 14 visit to USTRANSCOM at Scott AFB that Turkey's border with Iran is Turkey's "quietest" border. At the 2005 bilateral High Level Defense Group meeting, the military leadership emphasized to us the close intelligence cooperation between Turkey and Iran on the PKK, as well as the return of PKK terrorists by Iran to Turkey. Despite limited and apparently local cooperation with Iran on the PKK problem, the military has raised concerns about a "Shiite arc" of states from Kazakhstan through Iran, Iraq, Syria, and anchored by Hezbollah in

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Lebanon. While the TGS is often outspoken on political issues, senior officers have said little publicly about Iran until recently.

#### Shift of Regional Power

15. (C) Of deeper concern to Turkey than a direct military threat posed by future Iran nuclear missiles, however, is the potential for a shift of regional power and influence that could result from an Iranian weapons program, several contacts have told us. The relationship between Iran and Turkey is an old and wary one based on mutual respect and distrust. Despite recently improved relations and cooperation against the PKK along the border, the two countries are regional competitors. The two are successor states to powerful empires that have been at peace since 1639 on a stable border. Turks feel that the ayatollahs hate Turkey's secular system, while the overwhelming majority of Turks fear a Sharia state run by clerics on the Iran model. Iran loathes Turkey's relationship with Israel and has canceled two major Turkish investment deals for alleged "Zionist links:" Turkcell's bid to provide Iran with a digital cellular phone system, a deal reportedly worth \$3 billion, and a Turkish consortium's offer to operate Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport. In the 1980s, Iran attempted to export its revolution to Turkey, resulting in a request that the Iranian Ambassador, currently FM Manouchehr Mottaki, leave the country. Turks worry that Iran could have more success peddling its model in Turkey and elsewhere with the prestige and military power that nuclear weapons might provide.

#### What is Turkey Doing About it?

16. (C) PM Erdogan and his AKP government have taken an activist approach over the last year, engaging Iranian officials to attempt to convince them of the wisdom of conforming to the international community's view. Turkey

supported the June 6 P-5 Plus offer and its proposal for talks with Iran. When FM Gul went to Tehran June 24-25, his spokesman stated his real objective was to convince Iran to come to the table. Press statements from subsequent official Turkish visits to Moscow and Tel Aviv incorporated Turkey's concerns about Iran's nuclear program. Following Iranian FM Mottaki's visit to Ankara on August 11, the MFA announced that Gul and chief foreign policy advisor Ahmet Davutoglu had exerted "intense efforts" on the nuclear issue with Mottaki. Some analysts speculate that Turkey's EU ambitions have added pressure on PM Erdogan to conform to European views so as not to be seen as the odd man out.

¶7. (C) Few prominent Turkish politicians other than Erdogan and Gul have been willing publicly criticize Iran. While the government of Iran does not appear to enjoy widespread popular sympathy in Turkey, Tehran's stance on its nuclear program is a strong symbol of defiance to the U.S. According to ASAM's Keskin and others with whom we spoke, this resistance to the U.S. is attractive to a Turkish public whose polled opinions rank their views of U.S. policies towards the Middle East at an all-time low. Many Turks are suspicious of U.S. intentions and worry about the effects of any U.S. military strike against Iran.

¶8. (S) There is no outward indication that the TGS favors any kind of military action against Iran. Nevertheless, Turkey's military modernization and procurement programs indicate some contingency planning for this real external threat. Turkey has expressed an interest in new missile defense systems and has allocated funds for initial purchases. If confronted with Iranian nuclear missiles, the NSC's Gokpiner told us Turkey will rely on its NATO allies and ultimately on NATO Article 5 protection. In his view, the Iranian nuclear threat would not be one Turkey would stand up to alone, but would drive Turkey closer to its NATO roots.

#### Views on Sanctions

¶9. (C) Turkey views the sanctions issue through an Iraqi prism. The Turks remember well the price they were forced to pay to comply with sanctions against Iraq in the early

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1990's. Leaders here doubt sanctions would solve the nuclear problem, fear the economic consequences for Turkey, and worry about the impact on its relations with Tehran. Iran supplies 18 percent of Turkey's gas and is the only significant alternative to Russia. Iran transits 35,000 Turkish trucks per year to and from Central Asia, an economic life-line for those isolated states. Almost 90 percent of Turkish Airlines eastbound flights overfly Iranian airspace. One million Iranian tourists visit Turkey each year. Turkey views itself as a window to the West for Iran--one reason why it has not imposed any visa requirements on Iranians.

¶10. (C) Comment: Turkey is forced to balance its response to Iran with its economic and other short-term equities. For the success of U.S. policy, it is essential that Turkey work with and support our efforts. We can achieve this in part through regular consultations on nuclear-related diplomacy. NEA PDAS Jim Jeffrey's upcoming visit will provide a good opportunity to re-engage. It will also be helpful for us to be transparent and consult with the Turks on sanctions, whether UNSC-mandated or otherwise. It will undermine our ability to obtain the Turks' cooperation on the Iranian nuclear issue by painting them as bogeymen for not enforcing sanctions they had no say in establishing. Finally, we need to begin a bilateral discussion here about the defense and security implications of a nuclear-armed and missile-equipped Iran. This will help focus minds here away from problems and risks and toward a sensible response that is consistent with our alliance relationship and strategic partnership.

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